



# ORF Discourse

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## Australia and India: A People-based Partnership

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Minister for Immigration and Citizenship in the Australian Government

*Senator Chris Evans visited the Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi on July 22 and spoke on the close cultural ties that have been forged between the two countries, the safety of Indian students in Australia and migration prospects in the future. The following is the text of his address:*

I'm very pleased to be in New Delhi representing the Australian Labor Government and in my capacity as Minister for Immigration and Citizenship.

Today, I want to set out how Australia has been built on the foundation of migration from around the world, how we have forged a cohesive and thriving society from our cultural diversity through the policy approach we call multiculturalism, how the Indian diaspora has contributed very significantly to that success, and how we will continue to seek skilled Indian migration to build our nation. I will also address the urgent issue of the safety of international students in Australia.

I have been struck by the real and deep concern about the safety of your students in Australia. The Australian Government is absolutely committed to

supporting students to have a positive and fulfilling educational, social and cultural experience in Australia. We also take very seriously our reputation as a safe destination for international students seeking high quality education. And we value the diversity and richness international students bring to our country, as well as the innovation and vigour with which our education sector must respond in meeting their needs. Australia welcomes and encourages Indian students and Indian migrants to our country.

### **A people-based partnership**

Australia and India have the same fundamental approach to democracy, the rule of law and other critical supports of social stability, and these foundations have launched the economic expansion both nations have enjoyed in recent years. India more so than Australia, of course.

Indeed, our wide-ranging people-to-people and trade links are expanding across the many facets of a mature relationship between two nations with common economic, security, trade, democratic and other interests.

India is currently Australia's eleventh largest inbound tourism market with 116 000 arrivals in 2008, up a remarkable 22 per cent from the previous year. We shouldn't forget our mutual passion for cricket. As a boy, I idolised Bishan Bedi although my bowling was not of the same standard. My 13-year-old wicketkeeper son is a Dhoni fan but he will never replace his love of Adam Gilchrist.

Since the government led by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd took office in Australia in December 2007, there has been much mutual and cordial interaction between our two national governments. The agreement last year to take our relationship to the level of a strategic partnership, reflected our common view of the importance of our relationship and its great potential for strengthening in the future.

So when we look across the breadth and depth of the relationship between our countries, we see very strong and expanding people-to-people, governmental and economic links. These provide a sound base from which we can expand and strengthen this relationship in the future. I have no doubt that what will continue to truly bind us together will be our people, our common values and aspirations.

### **Multiculturalism and social harmony**

Of course, India is not the only country which contributes to Australia's cultural diversity and our student population. Since 1945, planned migration has made a massive nation-building contribution to our success as an economically strong and socially cohesive nation. Around seven million people have settled in that time a large addition to a country which now has a population of just 21 million. Today, some 45 per cent of all Australians were born overseas or have at least one parent who was born overseas. Both the deputy prime minister and I are migrants.

One of the great success stories of Australia as a nation is that we have a very culturally diverse society which

compares well to other countries in terms of our low levels of overt discrimination, social tension or disharmony. Underpinning our approach over the past thirty years is a policy platform which has often been described as Australian multiculturalism.

### **The core elements are:**

- ♦ Common responsibilities and rights for all members of our democracy
- ♦ The right to maintain cultural and religious traditions within the law and recognising the social value we derive from this diversity
- ♦ The need for programmes and services to respond to the individual circumstances, needs and goals of Australians in all their diversity.

One indicator of the success of Australia's approach to cultural diversity is a high inter-marriage rate among people of different ancestries. This demonstrates how comfortable people of different ethnicity are in mixing with others in Australian society.

I also suggest Australia is not an insular country. We are eager to engage with the world, both at home and abroad. Around one million Australians or five per cent of the population currently live overseas, with many in Asia. I certainly acknowledge it takes time and patience for community cohesion and tolerance to develop. These issues are not simple or easy. Although recent research suggests the vast majority of Australians are committed to cultural diversity and believe immigration has made the country stronger, we recognise there is a continuing need to address instances of cultural, racial and religious intolerance.

There are a range of cultural harmony programmes run by all levels of government in Australia, with many of these targeted at school children so our citizens are being exposed to concepts of belonging, acceptance and diversity at an early age.

### **The Indian Diaspora in Australia**

One of the great strengths in our relationship is the Indian diaspora in Australia. My department supported some academic research about five years

ago which indicated diasporas create goodwill between the peoples of both nations and they equip people with transferable skills and social and professional contact networks spanning both countries<sup>1</sup>. Diasporas are also likely to stimulate trade and joint research initiatives as well as enhancing cultural understanding.

The Indian diaspora brings a great richness to Australian society as a whole and through the unique people who have made singular and collective contributions across all facets of Australian life. Indeed, Indians were amongst the earliest settlers to Australia, with small groups first arriving in the early 1800s. We have a community at Woolgoolga near Coffs harbour in New South Wales where half the population are Australians of Punjabi and Sikh ancestry who began arriving in the 1940s and they reportedly own 90 per cent of the banana farms there. Today, this community is an excellent example of how people in Australia live harmoniously and productively, irrespective of their cultural origin.

There are now nearly 250 000 people of Indian origin in Australia making it one of the largest diasporas. Around 55 000 were born in Australia including over 5000 descendents of early settlers, and nearly 150 000 who were born in India.

The great majority of India-born migrants to Australia over the past ten years have been in our skilled migration visa stream. These are highly educated people with skills and expertise they have used to make noteworthy contributions in the fields of business, education, science engineering, medicine and public service, the arts and sport. Many of these were former students who undertook courses in Australia, for example:

- ◆ Vinod Daniel is the head of cultural heritage and science initiatives with the Australian museum and also chairman of AUSheritage, a network of Australian cultural heritage management organisations
- ◆ Professor Pal Ahluwalia is Pro Vice Chancellor and Vice President, education, arts and social sciences at the University of South Australia

- ◆ Associate Professor Kuldip Sidhu, from the University of New South Wales, is one of the world's leading researchers on stem cell research.

These and many others have played a major role in supporting Australia's competitiveness in leading edge science and technology. I should also mention Mrs Kumud Merani, executive producer of the Hindi language programme on our multicultural radio broadcaster SBS. She is also well known here, being a pioneer news reader on Indian television, and one of the most popular Doordarshan TV news readers in Mumbai. These are just a few examples. Indian Australians and their culture are now part of the fabric of Australian society. And Indian festivals such as Deepavali and Holi are very much a part of Australia's rich cultural expression, particularly in Melbourne. This reinforces my view that Australia and India have a people-based partnership.

It's in the people and their distinct and valued contributions in both countries that we really see the strength of the relationship between India and Australia and its future potential.

### **The safety of international students**

Let me say very clearly as the cabinet Minister for Immigration and Citizenship that I, and the Australian Government, recognise student safety and the possibility of racially targeted attacks are issues of very serious concern in our country. And, on a personal note, I am a father myself, and I know that while many children may feel invincible, parents here in India will naturally want to be confident their children are safe when travelling abroad.

Violence against another person is unacceptable in any country, and I express my sincere regret and the regret of the Australian government for the attacks that have occurred. This situation cannot continue and so I would like to summarise some of the initiatives underway to address this.

I recently met Indian community student leaders in Melbourne to listen to their concerns and assure them the Australian government welcomes students from India and values their presence in Australia. I also

emphasised that the reporting of incidents of concern to police will not impact on the visa status of international students.

Our broader response covers the gamut of immediate, medium and long term measures, as well as police and criminal justice responses, government reviews, taskforces and whole of government activity. Our academic institutions, police forces and community groups are also responding and I place great importance on our joint meetings and the planning underway with the Indian government.

Australia is a relatively safe country compared to many other nations, with one of the lowest homicide rates in the world. We also have a very effective law enforcement capability in all metropolitan areas, with a very good rate of apprehension for violent crime. There is no sense in which attacks of this sort will be tolerated or overlooked by our police forces and this has been made clear in the way they have responded to these attacks.

I can report the following. In relation to the six assaults and robbery that occurred between March and the middle of June this year in Melbourne, the Victorian police have arrested 11 males who are now facing trial. I understand their trials will be commencing this month and adults convicted of assault can be sentenced to between two and 25 years in these circumstances.

The Prime Minister of Australia recently spoke in the parliament on behalf of all Australians to deplore and condemn these attacks as senseless acts of violence. The next day the Prime Minister's Taskforce on Crimes against International students was established. Practical initiatives put in place include:

- ♦ A succession of high profile, visible police operations in both Victoria and New South Wales, targeting railway stations and other priority areas.
- ♦ Increased public safety information sessions and briefings for international students.
- ♦ Enhanced community liaison to work together to reduce the incidence of violence.

As an example, ten weeks ago Victorian police established Operation Safe Stations to target crime at train stations.

In planning and conducting these activities, Victorian police have explicitly recognised that Indian students are often travelling alone on trains after working late in the evening, and this leaves them vulnerable to crime.

At the broader level, Australia's Deputy Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, recently chaired a meeting of state and federal education and training ministers and announced a number of initiatives to promote and protect international student welfare, including:

- ♦ An international student taskforce to develop strategies to support overseas students in Australia.
- ♦ A telephone hotline through which students can raise concerns anonymously, with information to be collated and published on the [studyinaustralia.gov.au](http://studyinaustralia.gov.au) website so all students can benefit.
- ♦ The fast-tracking of a review of the operation of the Education Services for Overseas Students Act 2000 and the associated national code legal framework for the provision of education services in Australia to international students.

Our federal Department of Education has also written to all our international education providers to reinforce their responsibilities. In addition, the Australian Government rigorously audits the quality of education providers. A number of investigations are underway and one college has recently closed, following an investigation. When this occurs, we have arrangements in place to support students so they can continue their studies at another institution. We are also updating the Guide to studying and living in Australia to provide up-to-date information to help students settle into their Australian life and study.

The Prime Minister also announced on July 2 that an international student roundtable would be held in Canberra on September 14-15 to consider issues affecting international students. Students will be able

to directly discuss issues affecting their study experience, such as accommodation, welfare and safety. This feedback will then be considered at the inaugural ministerial council on tertiary education in November.

The Council of Australian Governments, or CoAG as it is known in Australia, has also considered the matter of student welfare as a matter of urgency. CoAG provides one of the highest and most comprehensive levels of government decision-making in Australia and CoAG agreed at the start of this month to develop a comprehensive national international student strategy.

The strategy will improve the international student experience, enhance the education offered, consider the quality of education providers and ensure a whole of government approach to international education and migration policies.

A few weeks ago, a delegation visited India, comprising senior Australian Government officials, others from the Victorian and New South Wales governments, as well as Victorian police and representatives of the vocational and higher education sectors. They met with government representatives, media and parents to hear their concerns and work with the government here to develop strategies to address these issues, as well as publicising the steps already taken in Australia to address student welfare and those planned for the future.

I should emphasise that Australia's universities and education providers are clearly a key link in this chain. The peak body, Universities Australia, has adopted a ten point action plan for student safety which emphasises strong law enforcement, cooperation among all stakeholders including diplomatic missions in Australia, improved information for students and better accommodation and financial arrangements.

I understand that your government is considering measures to improve the practices of education and migration agents in your country. The Australian government is only too willing to assist where it can.

### Immigration

A key challenge for the Australian Government remains-to communicate clearly that there is no automatic link between study in Australia and access to permanent residency.

We conduct a skilled migration programme that seeks to attract young migrants with high quality skills in the areas of skills shortage in Australia. The priorities for migration must be the needs of the Australian economy. Therefore the skills and qualifications we seek in migrants will vary over time. The Australian Government will adjust the program to meet our national needs and not be driven by the education choices of overseas students.

Those who seek to market access to a permanent visa in Australia rather than a quality education do a grave disservice to potential students.

The Deputy Prime Minister and I have announced a review of the migration occupations in demand list, the MODL, which is due to report at the end of October this year. The MODL is the skills migration targeting mechanism that provides a framework for forward planning.

The intention is to make the MODL more forward looking, thus putting the onus on the temporary and permanent employer sponsored visa categories to respond to the current skills shortages.

The outcome of the review will focus on Australia's skills needs for the future and encourage priority to migrants with high value and high quality skills. And that is why India is so important.

Over the last five years, Australia has settled nearly 85 000 permanent arrivals from India. India is the second largest source country after the United Kingdom, and may soon become the largest. We will be looking to India to be a major source of migrants, whether they were educated in Australia or educated in India. To that end, I am pleased to announce Australia will be undertaking a skills expo in this country next year. The expo will inform prospective migrants about the employment and lifestyle opportunities available in Australia.

I am also pleased to acknowledge that our two governments have agreed that the Joint Working Group on visas, passports and consular matters will meet for the first time next month. This is another example of how our two countries can establish better processing arrangements in this important field.

In conclusion, let me reiterate my message to India. Australia values highly our relationship with India. We wish to continue to build strong links and enduring relationships between our countries. It is a strategic partnership. Australia welcomes and encourages your

people as migrants, tourists and as students.

We will provide a safe and encouraging environment for your students. And we will continue to welcome Indian migrants as part of developing our multicultural society.

'Australia's Diaspora: Its Size, Nature and Policy Implications', Hugo, Rudd, Harris, Committee for the Economic Development of Australia, Information Paper No.80, July 2003

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